



## The Image of the First Vilamovians in the Narrative of the Wymysorys-Centric Communication Community

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### Abstract

The legend of exotic (i.e. non-German and non-Polish) roots is an important part of the modern narrative about Vilamovians, and it is present in both academic and journalistic discourse. Linguists and anthropologists have offered many theories about their ethnogenesis. According to most of them, it is the Wymysorys language that should be considered the living proof of Vilamovian origin, but only a few focused on the legends. In this paper, I do not analyze whether these legends are “true” or “false”. Rather, I reconstruct the image of the first settlers which is present in the colloquial narratives of Vilamovians, both in legends as well as in memory-based stories and comments. Considering the legends, the most important research questions are: How did the first settlers look? What language did they speak? Why did they choose to settle in Wymysou? Who was their leader? Following a presentation of Vilamovian narratives about these issues, I argue that the image of the first settlers is crucial for the identity of young members of this community and their sense of belonging.

**Keywords:** Wymysorys language; the legend of origin; folklore studies; ethnic group; Vilamovians; Wilamowice

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## Introduction

Vilamovians are an ethnic group living in the borderland between Upper Silesia and Lesser Poland (Król, 2022a). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, German and Polish nationalist activists tried to persuade them to declare themselves as part of the respective nations, but the Vilamovians constructed their identity in opposition to both Germanness and Polishness (Filip, 2005; Król & Maryniak, 2019). This identity is based on their own theory of their ethnogenesis, which says that they are descendants of settlers of Flemish, Frisian, or Dutch origin who arrived in Wymysöü<sup>1</sup> in the thirteenth century (Filip, 2005; Libera & Robotycki, 2001). This theory became especially important during the Second World War and, later on, the postwar persecution of Vilamovians. Because German nationalists believed in the Germanic origin of Vilamovians, they forced them to register themselves as Germans, which they had to confirm in 1941 by signing the *Volksliste*.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, after 1945 they had to prove to new authorities that they were not Germans. At that point, the theory of non-German origin was crucial for attempting to avoid persecutions (Król, 2022c). In spite of this, many Vilamovians suffered imprisonment in labor camps in Poland and the USSR, as well as expulsions and other persecutions and penalties for using the Wymysorys language and wearing their folk dress (Król, 2022b).

The legend of exotic (i.e. non-German and non-Polish) roots is also important for modern narratives about Vilamovians, and it is present in both academic and journalistic discourse. There are many studies where linguists and anthropologists attempt to prove various theories of their ethnogenesis; most of them consider the Wymysorys language to be a living proof of their origin. The most recent research on these theories was published before the birth of the language revitalization movement in Wymysöü (Barciak, 2001; Filip, 2003; Libera & Robotycki, 2001; Lipok-Bierwiazzonek, 2002; Ryckeboer, 1984). Some of the authors, even if they declared that they analyzed the data from an anthropological perspective, did not describe Vilamovians as an ethnic group, but as inhabitants of the town (cf. Libera & Robotycki, 2001). In general, most of the studies in question offer reviews of various opinions rather than in-depth anthropological or folkloristic analyses of legends collected in the field. This is also the case of the latest publications on the ethnogenesis of Vilamovians, which refer to the revitalization movement (Chromik, 2020; Król, 2016).

It is worth noting an article by Elżbieta Teresa Filip (2005), who collected and analyzed a number of opinions published in academic and popular texts between 1860 and 2005. She is critical of the representatives of the *Sprachinselforschung*, a movement of German linguists, ethnologists, and folklorists strongly influenced by nationalism (cf. Weber-Kellermann, 1959). In their opinion, Wymysöü was established by German

1 I use the name of the town in the Wymysorys language. The official name in Polish is Wilamowice.

2 The *Volksliste* was a means of classification of inhabitants of Nazi-occupied territories who the occupiers believed to have German roots. It was subdivided into four categories.

settlers, and its inhabitants were Germans. They explained the identity of Vilamovians, which was constructed in opposition to both Poles and Germans, as an effect of Polonization (cf. Kuhn, 1981, p. 53). Some of the authors claimed that the legends of exotic origin were instrumentalized by Vilamovians for their political goals (cf. Horak, 1981; Libera & Robotycki, 2001). However, the theories were instrumentalized by some of the authors themselves, especially by using nationalist discourse, which used to be common in both German and Polish ethnology (Król, 2021).

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir writes that ethnography “does not deal with facts, only with what people say about facts” (Tokarska-Bakir, 2004, p. 17). According to Albrecht Lehmann, in turn, myths are not a pure invention of fantasy: “In political myths and mythicized people, collective wishes and disappointments, published opinion, fears, interpretive models and prohibitions work together” (Lehmann, 2007, p. 127). In his opinion, “in narrative research, the question of the reality content of a story takes a back seat to the question of historical causes and social functions in the context of narrative culture” (Lehmann, 2007, p. 127). Therefore, the “proven historical facts” about the thirteenth-century origin of the town are much less important than the beliefs of modern Vilamovians and their needs and expectations. According to Eugen E. Roosens, ethnicity

offers a broad field for the use and manipulation of symbols. To begin with, the ingredients used in ethnic discourse seem quite natural: descent, biological origin, belonging together, land, culture, and history all seem eminently real and constitute what many people consider to be palpable realities. At the same time, they are all extremely vague in their definition. Nobody can deny that a given group of people has ancestors, that they have a past, a culture, a biological origin, or that they have been living somewhere, on some piece of land. These facts constitute the eminently solid, genuine, irreducible side of ethnicity, ethnic identity, and ethnic feelings. But who exactly these ancestors were, where they lived, what type of culture they transmitted, and the degree to which this culture was an original creation, and what their relationships were with other, similar ethnic groups in the past – all these are frequently open questions for the open mind. (Roosens, 1989, p. 160)

In this article, unlike some of the researchers mentioned above, I do not focus on whether the legends told by Vilamovians are “true” or “false”. Rather, I analyze the popular<sup>3</sup> Vilamovian narratives about themselves and reconstruct the image of the first settlers they contain. As opposed to traditional folklore studies, I do not look into the genre of these texts – it is the category of “popular narrative” that is crucial for my analysis (Kajfosz, 2021). I decided to focus on four issues which appeared repeatedly in the material collected during fieldwork: What did the first settlers look like? What language did they speak? Why did they choose to settle in Wymysou? Who was their leader? Following a presentation of the narrative of Vilamovians about these issues, I argue that the image of the first settlers is crucial for the identity of modern Vilamovians and their sense of belonging to their own culture.

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3 I understand popular or colloquial narrative as the narrative of my interlocutors as opposed to the journalistic (texts, movies, radio broadcasts) or academic narrative (academic texts).

The material I analyze in this paper includes folk stories, memory-based stories as well as brief comments. All of them were collected during participant observation and written down in field notes or recorded during interviews, which I conducted during my long-term fieldwork in Wymysöü in 2004–2023. I interviewed over 150 people, some of them many times.<sup>4</sup> My interlocutors were Vilamovians born in Wymysöü, mostly women, Wymysorys native speakers born before World War II. They were both multilingual (Wymysorys-Polish-German) and monolingual (Polish) narrators and they were members of one community of communication (cf. Lehmann, 2007, p. 201). In this way, I follow Jan Kajfosz's statement that members of such a community share the image of the world which they perceive as real (cf. Kajfosz, 2021, p. 33). In the case of memory-based stories, this community could be called a community of memory, which I understand as "an assemblage of individuals (not necessarily a group) who share a particular biographical experience, not always traumatic in nature, and their descendants who have inherited the family memory" (Nijakowski, 2006, p. 33).

In the case of research on folklore texts and popular narratives, it is important to collect data not only during interviews, but also while observing "the real situations" (cf. Lehmann, 2007, p. 151). Thus, I carried out participant observation of people of various ages and gender during local festivals and informal meetings.

## The Folkloristic Perspective

Kajfosz writes that folklore is "a particular case of a colloquial text that cannot be sufficiently defined by establishing its object or subject, but rather through means of its operating" (Kajfosz, 2021, p. 15). Folklore texts are systemic in nature – they are "a creation of a collective – a social network – and not an individual" (Kajfosz, 2021, p. 19). Jakobson and Bogatyrev, in turn, note that "the existence of a work of folklore requires a group to accept and sanction it for its continuation" (Jakobson & Bogatyrev, 1980, p. 7, as cited in Kajfosz, 2021, p. 22). The stories (even those told by individual eyewitnesses) that are interesting and acceptable for the group get adapted by the group to its needs and objectivized. As a result of this process, which is referred to as fabulization and folklorization, a new story in more variants is born (Hajduk-Nijakowska, 2016, p. 65).

During the fieldwork, I collected a significant amount of data. Following the methodology of folklore studies (Jakobson & Bogatyrev, 1980, p. 7), in order to analyze the collective narrative of Vilamovians, I selected those passages that include frequently recurring themes.

Jan Kajfosz writes as follows:

It is thanks to the categorization process that the socially constructed memory of the past can become memory of the continuation of what was "in the beginning". An imagining of the conti-

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4 Some of the data was published in Król (2023) and is also available at <https://wikitongues.org/languages/wym/>

nuity of images of the past is thus a condition of their legitimizing potential in relation to actual self-identifications and social institutions or the claims related to them. (Kajfosz, 2013, p. 354)

Indeed, for my interview partners, the category of “Vilamovians” was constant and unchanging. They saw their practice of being Vilamovians not as a recent practice but as a continuation of Vilamovianness whereby they belonged to the same category as the first settlers.

As Jakobson and Bogatyrev observe, “in folklore only those forms are retained which hold a functional value for the given community” (as cited in Kajfosz, 2021, p. 22). In the case of Vilamovians, the community has rejected such facts as the denomination of the first settlers (they were not Protestants as they arrived before the Reformation), the nineteenth-century origin of Vilamovian folk dress, or possible changes which the Wymysorys language has undergone, as well as other academic arguments against Vilamovian-centric theories of origin. Those facts do not exist any longer as a fact of folklore: “In folklore research the preventive censure of the community must be kept in mind constantly as a fundamental principle” (Jakobson & Bogatyrev, 1980, p. 7). Therefore, among many types of narratives (which are also present in the journalistic and academic discourse) only a few of the stories about the first Vilamovians became part of Vilamovian folklore. Sometimes the difference between the “expert” and “popular” narratives is only the authentication of the former by the authority of the printed word and the authority of their authors (cf. Nijakowski, 2009, p. 187).

## How Did They Look?

In the opinion of my interlocutors, the first settlers who arrived in Wymysöü were a group of people – men, women, and children – traveling in horse-drawn carts (some specified that they were ladder carts). In the course of preparations for the 200th anniversary of the town rights of Wymysöü, a Vilamovian activist from the older generation proposed the idea of a historical reconstruction show with the first settlers, which was to be held in the local football stadium:

It would be a great idea to show how these first Vilamovians traveled to Wymysöü. We could take 20–30 women and men in Vilamovian folk dress and get them in horse-drawn carts. Then they could arrive in the stadium and we would say that they are the first Vilamovians. (W/80/2014)<sup>5</sup>

This reconstruction never happened, but the idea is important for further analysis. Apart from the carts, which appear in the accounts of most Vilamovians, an important issue is how they dressed. In the opinion of most of my interlocutors, the first settlers wore Vilamovian folk dress, and such opinions were also reproduced by some Polish and German authors. The Polish nationalist activist Józef Latosiński wrote that the “national dress”<sup>6</sup> of Vilamovian women is a relic of the thirteenth century: “in this dress, which looks very picturesque, the wives of the first

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5 Quotations from my interlocutors are referenced using the following code: (gender / rounded age / year of record).

6 Latosiński’s “Vilamovian national dress” refers to a specific type of festive dress. In his opinion it was the most archaic one.



Vilamovian settlers came to this region" (Latosiński, 1909, p. 260). In the opinion of the German nationalist and painter Hertha Strzygowski, Vilamovian women had been dressing in the same way for centuries and their folk dress was "a relic of the Middle Ages" (Strzygowski, 1939, p. 559). She even portrayed Vilamovian women in this dress (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Hertha Strzygowski, *Wilmesauerin in Fronleichnamstracht* [A Vilamovian Woman in Festive Dress on Corpus Christi], 1954, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg, Leihgabe Kunstverwaltung des Bundes, photo by G. Janßen.

Her paintings were not very well known in Wymysoü, so they probably did not influence Vilamovian narrators. But the folk dress, which is still worn in Wymysoü by many Vilamovians today, could have the same function as a painting. According to Lehmann, a constant exposure to a given image leads to “a process of enculturation into a specific visual culture” (Lehmann, 2007, p. 169). The association of Vilamovian folk dress with “ancient Vilamovians”, learned by young Vilamovians because of the presence of the folk dress in public space of the town, remains a part of their image of the first settlers.

In the opinion of nationalist activists from the outside (both Polish and German), it was a particular type of the folk dress (the most festive one) that was a relic of the thirteenth century. Meanwhile, for Vilamovians, even those elements of their folk dress which appeared in Wymysoü around 1900 were of Flemish origin. One of my interlocutors, who was very engaged in preserving the Vilamovian folk dress and passing it on to the next generations, said the following about her *jüpka*:<sup>7</sup> “We have already been wearing this for 700 years” (W/85/2007). There are also popular fabulized stories about the Vilamovians who were stationed as soldiers (both in the First and Second World Wars) in “Belgium”, “Flanders”, “Holland”, or “the Netherlands” and saw women in Vilamovian folk dress there. In a TV interview, the Vilamovian amateur historian Jan Fox said:

The Hallers [i.e. the soldiers of General Józef Haller's army] were stationed in Belgium, in Flanders [...] and there were three or four from Wymysoü in Haller's army. And one of them, Grygierczyk, had the night watch. He saw a restaurant and lights in the windows. He went to the door and he heard [voices]. “They are speaking Wymysorys” [he thought]. [...] He knocked on the door. And they asked “Who's there?” “Open the door. It's me!” They opened and saw a Polish soldier, from Haller's army. They were afraid of him, but he said that he was the same [as them]... “Where are you from?” “Not far from Bielsko, we speak in the same way as you because we come from this region.” He drank with them later every evening. Grygierczyk said that they wore the same clothes as Vilamovians, but women's bonnets were a little bit different; but the scarves and green aprons [were the same]. He was a tailor, so he later made them in this form. (Latour, 1994)

A Vilamovian woman told me a story about her friend who was stationed in Amsterdam when he was a soldier:<sup>8</sup>

I will tell you what Biõežnjok-Jášü wrote to me in a letter; from the Netherlands, from Amsterdam. He was on his way to church, it was Sunday; and he walks and he can see a Vilamovian woman in folk dress. He goes towards her and says to himself “My mum has come to the Netherlands”; because he wrote her a letter. And he starts running and as he is a few meters away he can see that she's wearing wooden shoes. “Oh, it's not my mother.” But he passes by her: she's wearing Vilamovian folk dress. [...]. “She's wearing Vilamovian folk dress, I thought it's my mother, who came to visit me.” [...] And he wrote

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7 *Jüpka* is a type of caftan which appeared in Wymysoü in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

8 As a result of signing the *Volksliste*, Vilamovian men were drafted into the Wehrmacht. Vilamovian girls were supposed to send letters to boys from Wymysoü. This was also the case of the letter mentioned here. This story is a *memorate* – a memory of a friend (or boyfriend) of my interlocutor. He died a couple of months after sending the letter.

it in a letter. [...], it means our ancestors come from somewhere there, if he saw a woman in Vilamovian folk dress there. (W/100/2022)

For these two Vilamovians, it was obvious that the first settlers wore the same type of dress as them and their parents. The information that this type of dress first appeared in the nineteenth century, even though published in various texts in academic and popular books and local press, is not present in the popular narrative of Vilamovians. None of over a hundred of my interlocutors remembered two texts published in 1997 in a local magazine, where the Polish ethnographer Halina Bittner-Szewczykowa described what the clothes of the first settlers might have looked like (Bittner-Szewczykowa, 1997a, 1997b).

My interlocutors, even if they believed that their folk dress was a relic of the Middle Ages, did not reject the possibility of its later development. One of them, a woman who lived her whole life on the border of Wymysõ and Stara Wieś and was also engaged in preserving Vilamovian folk dress, said:

Yes, our folk dress is entirely different [from the other ones in surrounding villages]. These people [the first settlers] definitely arrived in this folk dress. And later they maybe improved it. Well, maybe, maybe not everything, but they went to Turkey and they brought some elements from there. (W/95/2022)

I also heard opinions that the plaid pattern of shawls is a proof of the Scottish origin of some settlers who joined the Flemish ones later.

## What Language Did they Speak?

As mentioned above, for most authors of academic and popular science publications about the origin of Vilamovians it is the language that could be the only relic, which thus makes it the most important evidence of the actual origins of the first settlers. Especially in Europe, language has a big role in the ethnic revival of minority groups (Haarmann, 1986, p. 40). In the case of a text of folklore, what plays a considerable role is not only the person of the narrator but also the listener, that is, what the narrator assumes to be the expectation of the listener. Vilamovians expect that both linguists and Vilamovians see the language as a relic of the first settlers.

One example is the story about Vilamovians in General Haller's army who met people speaking the same language as them. This story has been fabulized and folklorized – the man who told it on TV was born in 1903, so he remembered the time of the First World War. Most of my interlocutors shared with me the objectivized version about “some Vilamovian soldiers” who met Wymysorys-speaking people in Belgium, Flanders, Friesland, or the Netherlands (Holland).

Anna Fox (1927–2023), a Vilamovian woman, was in contact with Dr. Hugo Ryckeboer (1935–2020), a West Flemish dialectologist who did his research on Wymysõ in the late 1970s and 1980s. She visited him several times in Belgium. In her opinion, there are many Wymysorys words that are similar to Flemish ones: “He told me to speak Wymysorys, and while I was speaking he told me: ‘Anna, this word is Flemish, [and] this word is Flemish’”



(W/95/2022). She claimed that when she was there she could communicate easily thanks to her command of Wymysorys: "I went to the shop and I wanted to buy sour cream, and I said it in Wymysorys: *roüm*. And in Flemish it's *room*. That's a Flemish word!" (W/95/2011). The etymology of particular Wymysorys and Flemish words is not the topic of this essay. What is important for my analysis is that such opinions are reproduced by the whole community and thus become a part of the folklore of the Vilamovian community of communication. Many of my interlocutors mentioned that the Wymysorys language is similar to German. However, in this case there were no recurring interpretive models, but rather individual observations which had not been fabulized and folklorized – such interpretation would not be acceptable to most members of the community.

In the opinion of my interlocutors, another relic of the first settlers would be their surnames. But again, only those surnames are mentioned which are still used: Biba, Danek, Fox, Mika, Mosler, Figwer, Rosner, Schneider, Zejma etc. A significant number of those interviewed stressed that "[the surname] Fox came later from Scotland" (W/90/2023). They also said that some surnames which are popular in Wymysoü, such as Balcarczyk or Nowak, are of Polish origin, so they were certainly not in use among the settlers.

## Who Was Their Leader?

Vilamovians make a connection between the name of the town, Wymysoü, with the supposed name of the leader of the settlers. They say that the first village they established was called Wymysdiöf (Polish: Stara Wieś) and the name means "Wilhelm's village". Wymysoü, in turn, means "also Wilhelm's" and was founded a few years later. Wilhelm is the most popular name present in their narrative. Some people talked about William rather than Wilhelm. The latter name is more similar to the Polish name of the town: Wilamowice, and, what is probably more important, as opposed to Wilhelm, it is not associated with Germany. In one of the popular documentaries about Wymysoü (*Osada Wilama* [William's Settlement], produced in 1998 by Polish Television), a Vilamovian woman explains: "Tradition says that some William... not Wilhelm, but precisely William; William came from somewhere in the West and he brought his group" (Kaletowa, 1998). Nonetheless, in the statements of my interlocutors the name Wilhelm occurred much more frequently.

## Why Did They Choose to Settle in Wymysoü?

As mentioned above, many Vilamovians believe that Wymysdiöf (Stara Wieś) was the first village established by the same settlers who later founded Wymysoü. In some variants of the story of the beginning of the town there were two brothers (cf. Król & Maryniak, 2019): one founded Wymysdiöf and the other – Wymysoü:

My mum always told me that some two brothers arrived; from Holland or Belgium, that's not proven. And first they settled – because there were a lot of forests here – they settled in Stara Wieś. Later they cut down these forests and came to the plain area. And one of these brothers was called Wilhelm. And that's how Wymysoü came into being. (W/95/2012)

Regardless of the version, it was Wilhelm who founded Wymysoü. Vilamovians do not know much about him but according to some opinions “he was very clever because he led them so many hundred kilometers” (W/100/2022).

A common opinion is that the first settlers left Flanders because of a big flood which occurred there in the thirteenth century. One argument used to support this theory is as follows: “They came from a big water, from a sea. And then they were afraid of water, so they settled in a place where there is no water. There is no bigger river, only small brooks” (W/95/2022). In the opinion of some younger Vilamovians who are engaged in language revitalization, “to this day, Vilamovians don't like water; they don't like to swim” (W/20/2014).

Another opinion which was quite popular at the beginning of my research (2004–2012) was that the first settlers had fled from religious persecutions because they were Protestants: “They were definitely Protestants, the first Vilamovians, because there are no prayers or Christmas carols in our language” (W/70/2004). This argument presumably has its origin in stories about the Reformation in Wymysoü, where most Vilamovians were Calvinists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Bem, 2020). This information, present in the media and retold by local activists, became fabulized and folklorized.<sup>9</sup> Even though, from the historical point of view, it is impossible to talk about Protestants in the thirteenth century, for the Vilamovians sharing this story it was an important argument for their distinctness. It used to be popular but in recent years vanished completely. This opinion was shared mostly by those who were not engaged in the dance group or language revitalization activities. It was not acceptable for both the young generation and older activists. Texts of folklore vanish if people do not find them attractive anymore (cf. Jakobson & Bogatyrev, 1980, p. 5). For younger people, it was unacceptable because they had a better knowledge of history. The older activists in Wymysoü, in turn, followed the narrative of the Catholic clergy, where Protestants are presented as “strangers” or destroyers of the only right order of things (cf. Kubica, 2011, pp. 17–20, 154–156).

All Vilamovians agree that Wilhelm and his group of settlers first established Wymysdiöf (Stara Wieś). However, they explain the reason behind founding a new village in various ways. Some argue that there were two brothers (Wilhelm and his brother, or Wilhelm had two sons) and they established two sister villages. The most popular explanation, shared by all my interviewees, is that “there were too many hills in Stara Wieś, and Wymysoü is located on a plain” (W/90/2014). A Vilamovian woman who wanted to help some researchers find

9 For example, in a video entitled “Wszyscy zapomnieli o tym języku – Wilamowski język najmniejszej mniejszości etnicznej w Polsce [Everyone Forgot About This Language – Vilamovian: The Language of Poland's Smallest Ethnic Minority], available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kBJ6wbnAQo> (Irańczyk w Polsce, 2021).

the origin of the first settlers said: "Maybe, maybe you will find where they were from; if they were so... They didn't want to be there because there are so many dikes and so on in Stara Wieś. That's why they came to Wymysöü; they settled here" (W/90/2014). Some of my interlocutors saw the Vilamovian fear of water mentioned above as the reason why they had left Stara Wieś, where there are many ponds and streams.

Although they explained it in different ways, all those interviewed agreed that the new site which the settlers had chosen was much better than Stara Wieś. It was covered by forest and they had to work hard to clear it, but their decision to move to the plain was right, and it was worth the effort. In the opinion of Vilamovians, the fact that, unlike in all surrounding villages, there has never been any flood in Wymysöü, shows the foresight of the first settlers.

## Conclusions

In the course of my fieldwork I collected a significant amount of data, including a number of variants of legends of the origin of Vilamovians. I focused on the elements which were common in most of them. The image of the first settlers among my oldest interlocutors closely resembles the image they have of Vilamovians as a group in their own lifetime, and especially in the lifetime of their parents and grandparents. They used the same ladder carts, spoke the same language, and wore the same folk dress. They were very clever (they chose a good place to settle), they were smart traders and hardworking farmers (they cleared the forest). Their culture was more developed than that of the people from surrounding villages. This is the self-image of Vilamovians today: the inhabitants of Stara Wieś, who, according to this legend, are descendants of the same settlers, are excluded from this image. In the opinion of Vilamovians, they do not share their heritage to the same extent because they do not share the same culture, history, and values. It is important to mention that in the narrative of the Vilamovian-centric communication community, the Poles, including those living in Stara Wieś, were responsible for the postwar persecutions of Vilamovians (cf. Król, 2022c).

The stories about the first settlers in Wymysöü make up a mythology of the beginning of the town. According to Goody, myth "usually has a strongly religious and even explanatory role; it is not recited 'raw' round a campfire but to adults in a special ritual context" (Goody, 2010, p. 8). Referring to Kowalski (1990, p. 117), Kajfosz writes that "mythologies [...], through their workings, guarantee to an individual a 'cognitive' and 'axiological' comfort of being oriented in shifting circumstances, in which he or she might have to participate". They simplify and immobilize the "diverse and changing world" (Kajfosz, 2021, p. 58). For members of the Vilamovian-centric communication community, the category of "Vilamovians" did not change during the eight centuries. The only change is that today there are fewer people who could be described as Vilamovians than there used to be.

The dominant image of the first settlers as people with the same features as Vilamovians living in the interwar period does not mean that my interlocutors were convinced of centuries of isolation and conservatism of their ancestors. During my fieldwork, they stressed the trade trips of Vilamovians and their openness to the world. However, the existence of folklore texts is primarily conditioned by the natural, immanent human need to persist in tradition (Krawczyk-Wasilewska, 1986, p. 55). Consequently, Vilamovians, as the heirs of this culture, believe they belong to the same category as the first settlers, as opposed to the inhabitants of Stara Wieś, who became “Poles”.

Some ethnographers have referred to the belief in the Flemish origin of Vilamovians as the “Flemish myth” (cf. Lipok-Bierwiazzonek, 2002). This myth explains not only the foundation of the first settlement, but also the modern features of Vilamovians as an ethnic group. The most important message is the difference between Vilamovians and both Germans and Poles. One of the functions of myths as well as folk tales and legends is to unite ethnic groups (Lehmann, 2007, p. 202). In the case of Vilamovians, this myth is still alive, not only among language revitalization activists or regionalists, but also among people who are not engaged in such activities. Albrecht Lehmann writes that myths belong to everyday storytelling in Europe (Lehmann, 2007, p. 204). In the case of Vilamovians, the myth of origin has been strengthened by the decades of its presence in the media, where local specialists as well as academics and journalists have repeatedly presented various versions of the legends, sometimes to exoticize Vilamovians. In my opinion, the “Flemish myth” could be much more present than the Wymysorys language and Vilamovian folk dress in the future thanks to the media – even if some journalists (depending on the media outlets they represent) stress or, conversely, remain silent about the distinctness of Vilamovians from both Poles and Germans.

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## Obraz pierwszych Wilamowian w narracji wilamowskocentrycznej wspólnoty komunikacyjnej

### Abstrakt

Legenda o egzotycznym (nie polskim i nie niemieckim) pochodzeniu Wilamowian jest istotnym elementem współczesnej narracji o Wilamowianach. Jest ona obecna zarówno w akademickim, jak i publicystycznym dyskursie. Językoznawcy i antropolodzy wspominali o teoriach o pochodzeniu pierwszych Wilamowian. Dla większości to język wilamowski powinien być żywym dowodem na pochodzenie Wilamowian. Jedynie kilkoro z nich skupiło się na samych legendach. W tym artykule nie będę analizował tego, czy legendy te są „prawdziwe”, czy „fałszywe”. Skupię się raczej na rekonstrukcji obrazu pierwszych osadników, który jest obecny w potocznej narracji Wilamowian, zarówno w legendach, jak i w opowieściach wspomnieniowych czy pojedynczych wypowiedziach. W nawiązaniu do legend najważniejsze pytania badawcze to: jak wyglądali pierwsi osadnicy, jakim językiem mówili, dlaczego zdecydowali się na osiedlenie w Wilamowicach, kto był ich liderem. Po zaprezentowaniu narracji Wilamowian na ten temat, pokażę, że obraz pierwszych osadników jest kluczowy dla tożsamości i poczucia przynależności wśród młodych Wilamowian.

**Słowa kluczowe:** język wilamowski; legenda pochodzenia; folklorystyka; grupa etniczna; Wilamowianie, Wilamowice

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